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ABSTRACT

In many urban areas, educators rely on magnet schools to strike a delicate balance between the need to create opportunities for equity in education and the need for parents to have greater choice among schools. But, are magnet schools successful? This document considers whether they fulfill the promises of high achievement and desegregation in inner city areas. Data from 35 full-site magnet schools in Chicago at the elementary and middle school levels show that they are successful, but not necessarily for the reasons many people believe. Aid to expand magnet schools and choice programs has been offered, but these offers may shift the focus of magnet schools from an emphasis on the interests that specific urban populations have in desegregation back to its original emphasis as a more universal concept of choice, and for this reason the offers have been rejected by many educators. Instead of squashing choice when it has been shown to work in magnet schools, it would be useful to turn most of the existing schools into magnet schools and thereby make proven quality universally available. Chicago can show the nation that freedom of choice and private-sector initiative are forces that should be unleashed in education so that, in unison, these forces can continue to accomplish what they already have done so well. One table and seven references are included. (JS)

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Magnet Schools in Chicago

Achievement at Risk if Policymakers Retreat

Magnet schools have become the darling of education policymakers across the country during the past two decades. After they were developed, they were conscripted to fight in the battle to eliminate the twin evils of low achievement and segregation in urban education. A 1983 study sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education shows that there are now over 1000 magnet schools in more than 130 of the largest urban school districts in the country (Blank, *et al.*, 1983).

Are magnet schools successful? Can they fulfill the promises of high achievement and desegregation in inner-city areas? Data from 35 full-site magnet schools in Chicago at the elementary and middle school levels show that they are successful, but not necessarily for the reasons many people believe. In addition, there are education reformers nationwide who are opposed to choice programs. By threatening the future of magnet schools, they may kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.

In many urban areas, educators rely on magnet schools to strike a delicate balance between the need to create opportunities for equity in education and the need for parents to have greater choice among schools. Many school districts have voluntarily developed magnet schools, attracting Blacks and Whites by appealing to their mutual interest in learning environments that foster high achievement.

In spite of this, magnet schools are not completely market-driven alternatives to compulsory attendance within school boundaries. The location and capacity of these schools often is manipulated to meet court-ordered mandates for desegregation. They represent, instead, what is called "controlled choice."

Chicago magnet schools can be divided into four types according to the achievement of their students. At the bottom of the scale are magnet schools in which the median grade equivalents are below national norms for reading, for mathematics or both. In the majority of magnet schools, however, scores may be

up to one year above norm or from one to two years above norm. There also are "super" magnets in which students perform two to three years above norm on both reading and mathematics.

The data in the table below indicate that some magnet schools are indeed successful, when success is measured by racially-mixed enrollment patterns and high test scores. On the other hand, some of the following popular myths do not withstand close scrutiny, at least not in Chicago:

School Size. *Magnet schools are not successful because they are smaller than non-magnet schools.*

It is true that some magnet schools with high levels of student achievement have an average enrollment of 328 each, while magnets in which there is low achievement average 780 students. Nevertheless, one group of 13 high-performing magnets has an average of 666 students, which is only 23 fewer students than at the average non-magnet school in the city.

Median Grade Equivalents, Enrollment and Budgets at Magnet Schools in Chicago

(Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, Grade 6, 1988, Norm = 6.7)

I: MEDIAN GRADE EQUIVALENTS BELOW NORM ON READING

SCHOOL	DIST	GRADE EQUIVALENTS				ELEM & MIDDLE SCHOOL ENROLLMENT						PERCT WHITE	STUD/ TCHR RATIO	PERCENT LOW INCOME
		READ		MATH		AfAm	Hisp	White	Amin	Asian	Total			
Eisenstein Schol Acad	7	5.8	-9	6.4	-3	874	0	0	0	0	874	0	18	64.3
Gallagher Lang Acad	19	6.2	-5	6.7	0	58	365	299	2	5	710	40	19	26.6
Jensen Schol Acad	9	6.3	-4	7.1	.4	877	0	7	0	0	884	1	18	62.0
Goodlow	15	6.3	-4	6.6	-1	581	6	136	0	1	723	19	21	50.4
Randolph	15	6.4	-3	6.6	-1	639	0	202	0	0	840	24	19	43.9
Kanoon	10	6.6	-1	7.1	.4	95	519	145	0	27	786	16	19	54.1
Meredith	18	6.6	-1	7.0	.3	834	112	85	1	5	1,037	8	22	43.1
MEAN		6.3	-4	6.8	.1						780	16	19	
SUBTOTAL						3,687	1,001	863	3	38	5,482			
PERCENT						36	22	10	3	4	27			
MEAN PER-PUPIL EXPENDITURE = \$4,300														

II: GRADE EQUIVALENTS 0 TO 1 YEAR ABOVE NORM

SCHOOL	DIST	GRADE EQUIVALENTS				ELEM & MIDDLE SCHOOL ENROLLMENT						PERCT WHITE	STUD/ TCHR RATIO	PERCENT LOW INCOME
		READ		MATH		AfAm	Hisp	White	Amin	Asian	Total			
Sabin	6	6.7	0	6.7	0	47	310	118	1	7	481	24	14	47.3
Sauvado	6	6.7	0	7.0	.3	46	880	172	1	2	1,113	15	20	44.2
Stone Schol Acad	2	6.7	0	7.2	.5	198	109	216	7	208	724	30	20	30.4
Inter-American	3	6.6	.2	7.2	.5	50	396	184	6	10	615	25	19	32.2
Owen Schol Acad	15	7.0	.3	7.2	.5	128	28	108	10	0	274	39	16	28.4
Danely	2	7.1	.4	7.2	.5	527	510	435	6	207	1,887	26	16	38.0
Burnside Schol Acad	19	7.2	.5	7.5	.8	790	16	4	1	1	812	0	18	40.6
Turner-Drew Lang Acad	18	7.2	.5	7.5	.8	300	22	58	2	0	383	15	18	24.3
Thorp Schol Acad	1	7.3	.6	7.7	1.0	331	74	220	7	57	689	32	19	33.5
Jackson Lang Acad	9	7.5	.8	8.2	1.5	157	185	182	0	14	498	33	18	46.5
Gunsolus Schol Acad	8	7.6	.9	7.3	.6	206	230	244	9	9	698	35	19	35.0
Pershing	11	7.7	1.0	7.7	1.0	227	0	36	0	0	263	20	17	48.0
Black & Branch	19	7.7	1.0	8.0	1.3	339	39	40	1	8	427	9	18	36.7
MEAN		7.2	.5	7.4	.7						666	25	18	
SUBTOTAL						3,325	2,779	1,986	51	521	8,664			
PERCENT						33	51	43	50	49	43			
MEAN PER-PUPIL EXPENDITURE = \$4,195														

III: GRADE EQUIVALENTS 1 TO 2 YEARS ABOVE NORM

SCHOOL	DIST	GRADE EQUIVALENTS				ELEM & MIDDLE SCHOOL ENROLLMENT						PERCT WHITE	STUD/ TCHR RATIO	PERCENT LOW INCOME
		READ		MATH		AfAm	Hisp	White	Amin	Asian	Total			
Franklin	3	7.8	1.1	7.7	1.0	148	39	103	3	89	382	28	15	42.3
Newberry	3	7.8	1.1	7.6	.9	284	106	192	6	55	643	30	16	4.6
Sayre Lang Acad	4	7.8	1.1	7.1	.4	187	97	173	10	11	478	38	18	34.1
Murray Lang Acad	14	7.8	1.1	7.9	1.2	262	2	72	3	4	343	21	20	41.5
Sheridan	11	8.0	1.3	7.8	1.1	193	84	173	3	86	519	33	17	40.5
Bassley	13	8.1	1.4	8.1	1.4	895	28	238	3	15	1,179	20	21	49.4
Hawthorne Schol Acad	3	8.1	1.4	8.3	1.6	78	216	170	3	58	517	33	16	32.9
Vanderpool	18	8.2	1.5	7.8	1.1	238	2	87	0	0	307	22	19	23.0
McDade Classical	19	8.5	1.8	8.2	1.5	119	1	38	0	1	160	24	12	38.4
MEAN		8.0	1.3	7.8	1.1						501	27	17	
SUBTOTAL						2,404	547	1,227	31	296	4,508			
PERCENT						24	12	27	29	28	22			
MEAN PER-PUPIL EXPENDITURE = \$4,200														

IV: GRADE EQUIVALENTS 2 TO 3 YEARS ABOVE NORM

SCHOOL	DIST	GRADE EQUIVALENTS				ELEM & MIDDLE SCHOOL ENROLLMENT						PERCT WHITE	STUD/ TCHR RATIO	PERCENT LOW INCOME
		READ		MATH		AfAm	Hisp	White	Amin	Asian	Total			
Decatur Classical	4	8.8	2.1	8.9	2.2	45	32	95	2	73	237	40	17	22.4
LaSalle Lang Acad	3	8.8	2.1	8.3	1.6	181	124	181	11	58	555	33	18	34.2
Poe Classical	20	9.2	2.5	9.0	2.3	146	5	29	0	0	180	18	11	37.9
Edison Classical	1	9.4	2.7	8.9	2.2	57	37	95	4	59	252	38	17	23.7
Skinner Classical	9	9.4	2.7	9.0	2.3	219	81	129	2	8	417	31	7	48.7
MEAN		9.1	2.4	8.8	2.1						328	32	14	
SUBTOTAL						648	240	520	19	195	1,641			
PERCENT						7	5	11	18	19	8			
MEAN PER-PUPIL EXPENDITURE = \$5,727														
TOTAL						9,934	4,578	4,408	108	1,084	20,275			
PERCENT						100	100	100	100	100	100			
All Elementary & Middle School Students														
Magnet as Percent of All														
						175,518	78,184	37,480	530	7,787	297,479			
						6	6	12	20	14	7			

(Source: Computed by the Institute for Independent Education from data supplied by the Chicago Public Schools.)

Class Size. *Smaller class sizes are not necessarily linked to high performance on standardized tests.*

Among magnet schools, as test scores rise, student-teacher ratios fall from 19 students per teacher to 14. On the other hand, even though non-magnet schools have an average of 19, many of them have as few as 9, and still there is low performance. Another reason why reducing class sizes may not be the answer is that 35 percent of all Chicago students already are in schools where class sizes are equal to or smaller than those at the better magnets (18:1), and 78 percent of the non-magnets in that group are below norm on one or more indicators.

Money. *More money for education does not automatically produce higher levels of academic achievement.*

The city spends an average of \$5,727 per pupil at the "super" magnets and \$4,300 at below-norm magnets. Yet, at most of the other magnets, where median scores are above norm, per-pupil costs average as little as \$4,195, which is less than the \$4,302 being spent at non-magnet schools.

Asians and Whites. *Asian-Americans do not flock to predominantly-White schools.*

Chicago researcher Gary Orfield notes in his 1987 study that the typical Asian-American attends a school that is 58 percent White. However, the 1989 enrollment data examined by the Institute for Independent Education show that 62 percent of the Asians are in magnet and non-magnet schools that are less than 40 percent White. They share those schools with 86 percent of the Hispanic population and 95 percent of the African Americans.

Benefit to African Americans. *Magnet schools do not benefit significant numbers of African-American students.*

Of the 175,518 African Americans in elementary and middle schools, only 6 percent are privileged to attend magnet schools. More than one-third of that 6 percent is in magnet schools that are below national norms. On the other hand, 6 percent of Hispanic students, 12 percent of Whites, and 14 percent of Asians attend magnet schools.

Desegregation. *African-Americans do not need to be surrounded by Whites or by students from high-income families in order to have high achievement.*

Magnet schools usually create environments in which there are significant numbers of White

students. It is also true that magnets where there is low performance tend to have smaller percentages of Whites than high-performing magnets. However, the differences in achievement may not be the result of an increased White presence.

For example, in at least one of the "super" magnets, Poe Classical, 81 percent of the students are African Americans and an additional 3 percent are Hispanic-Americans, and 38 percent of these students come from low-income families. Another high-performing magnet, Burnside Scholastic Academy, is 99 percent African American and 41 percent low-income. On the other hand, one of the worst-performing magnets, Gallistei, is 40 percent White with 29 percent low-income families.

The task ahead to reform Chicago schools is tremendous. In fact, achievement at magnet schools can be set in the sharpest relief when it is contrasted with achievement at non-magnet schools.

For example, 70 percent of the African Americans in Chicago and 53 percent of Hispanics attend elementary schools in which the median grade equivalents are below norm on two key indicators of academic achievement: reading and mathematics (Institute Report No. 3). Another 18 and 31 percent, respectively, are in schools below norm on at least one of those indicators. Over 84 percent of all high schools, serving 82 percent of secondary students in the city, are below norm on both reading and mathematics.

If policymakers find it desirable to give all Chicago schools a student-teacher ratio that is comparable to at least the above-norm magnets (18:1), the city would require 1,515 additional elementary and middle school teachers. However, the problem may in fact be more severe, because a significant number of the existing elementary and middle school teachers might not be competent to teach in even a low-achieving magnet school.

Recent policy initiatives and debates have highlighted the need for a more serious study of magnet schools. The Bush Administration proposed to expand magnet schools by offering \$100 million in aid that is not limited to desegregation efforts (Miller, 1989). This offer may shift the focus of magnet schools from an emphasis on the interests that specific urban populations have in desegregation back to its original emphasis as a more universal concept of choice. It will also disrupt the database that is emerging on the achievement of African Americans in magnet schools, because school districts will no longer have a legal requirement to keep track of this population.

The National Education Association recently passed a resolution supporting local choice programs but rejecting programs mandated by federal and state governments. Many districts currently receive federal, state and local support, but the NEA, by rejecting two of the three sources, risks dismantling magnet schools. Although magnet schools do not now serve large numbers of African Americans, they have the potential for being a major instrument for high achievement by African-Americans in public schools.

Leading African-American educators, who met in June at Hunt Valley, Maryland, are also rethinking choice. They, too, rejected choice, because choice programs have the potential to discriminate against poor families who attend non-magnet neighborhood schools. They fear that these families might not be welcome in certain schools of choice (Bradley and Snider, 1989).

If magnet schools work and most non-magnet schools in Chicago don't work, and if magnet schools do not necessarily cost more than non-magnets or even require many more teachers, why are educators talking about squashing choice? Why not, instead, turn most of the existing schools into magnet schools and thereby make proven quality universally available?

Can the magnet experience be replicated in non-magnet schools? It requires more than merely tax dollars, new teacher candidates, and a different curriculum. We need to find out about some of the less tangible factors involved, such as the commitment of students, families and teachers that is the direct result of choice.

Second, it calls for acceptance of the possibility that the competence of teachers may make the difference.

Third, African Americans need to understand that they can, in their own cultural contexts, reach levels of high achievement that are equal to those of other groups. Learning can be stimulated in an African-American context if there is commitment.

Fourth, Chicago should broaden its experiment to promote excellence by embracing independent

inner-city schools as full partners in education. Operated by African Americans and Hispanic Americans themselves, these institutions serve young people right in their own neighborhoods.

Educators in non-magnet government schools not only are failing to deliver what they should, they are laying the foundation for a full retreat on choice in public schools. In the name of egalitarianism, they appear to favor proposals that keep the largest number of people at the lowest levels of academic achievement.

Chicago, with a broad range of schools that encompasses the worst and the best, is in an excellent position to demonstrate that there is hope. Chicago can show the Nation that freedom of choice and private-sector initiative are forces that should be unleashed in education so that, in unison, they can continue to do what they already have done so well.

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